

Major Wild Land Fire Threatens Residential Outdoor School at Walker Creek Ranch

~ September 2004 ~

Marin County Office of Education

Marin County Office of Education

- **Serves 40,000 students, 19 districts and 74 public and 45 private schools;**
- **Central Office located in San Rafael, California;**
- **Walker Creek Ranch serves as a site for residential Outdoor Science School and conference center; and**
- **Is one of 25 county operated outdoor schools in California.**

Walker Creek Ranch

A 1,700 Acre Remote, Rural Property

30 Miles from the Central Office



- **Access to the property is via a two-lane road**
- **The facility is self-contained**
 - Roads
 - Utilities
 - Water
 - Sewage
 - Other services
 - 36 buildings
 - 315 resident capacity

The Outdoor School at Walker Creek Ranch

- Serves 6,000 students per year;
- Students are comprised of 5th and 6th graders from 11 San Francisco bay area counties; and
- Operates from early September to mid-June.



Hands-on Science and Social / Community Skills



4:50 p.m. Tuesday September 7, 2004
Major Fire Reported
Two Miles East of Ranch



Status of School Program

- Two schools on site, approximately 110 students, staff and residents;
- An “Arrival Day” was underway and students were enroute to dinner;
- Smoke from the fire was dramatic and visible to all; and
- A high fire danger existed with grass, brush and forest in extremely dry condition.



5:30 p.m. School Command Center Established



- **Notification by Ranch to Marin County Office of Education;**
- **Communication established with Fire Department Command Center;**
- **Fire Suppression Resources confirmed;**
- **Forecasting/planning for the next 24 hours; and**
- **Fire watch activated.**

5:45 p.m. Emergency Action: Take Cover

- Staff briefed on developing incident;
- Alternative evacuation assembly location established;
- Fire watch schedule was developed;
- Teachers communicate with students;
- Phone trees at home schools activated; and
- Transportation plan for evacuation developed.



Fire Fight Continues



- Fire Captain assured the safety of students;
- Weather began to cooperate, however fire was not contained;
- Multiple evacuation plan scenarios were formulated and communicated to key staff; and
- Ranch water systems for fire suppression were checked.

8:20 p.m. Emergency Action: Shelter in Place

- Staff assigned in two-hour shifts to keep watch on fire and winds;
- All key staff in radio contact;
- Evacuation plans finalized; and
- Local news reports on fire monitored.



Local ABC Evening News

5:15 a.m. - 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, September 8, 2004

- **Fire 25% contained;**
- **Santa Ana-like winds conditions precipitated smoke throughout the property; and**
- **Smoke became a primary concern for several medically-fragile students.**



9:00 a.m.

Emergency Action: Evacuation

- Communications on parent concerns evaluated;
- Weather report/wind conditions analyzed;
- County Fire Chief containment report reviewed;
- Superintendent consulted; and
- Decision to evacuate.



11:45 a.m.

Recovery Activities

- All students successfully evacuated;
- Incident debriefing with staff; and
- Property surveyed for insurance reporting.



2:30 p.m. Incident Debriefing



Recommendations to:

- Obtain approved emergency identification badges for key staff;
- Update bus transportation agreements to include emergency notification procedures; and
- Review emergency communication/notification protocols; and
- Establish Memorandum of Understandings for 24-hour evacuation.

Incident Timeline

Tuesday

- 4:50 p.m.:** Fire Reported
- 5:30 p.m.:** School Command Center Established
- 5:45 p.m.:** Emergency Action: Take Cover
- 8:20 p.m.:** Emergency Action: Shelter in Place

Wednesday

- 5:15 a.m.:** Conditions Update
- 9:00 a.m.:** Emergency Action: Evacuation
- 11:45 a.m.:** Recovery Activities
- 2:30 p.m.:** Incident Debriefing

Lessons Learned

- **Relationships with public safety officials are critical;**
- **Regular practice for student release is important;**
- **PIO functions are a major priority;**
- **MOU's to secure services (i.e. transportation, emergency shelter) should be signed in advance; and**
- **Incident debriefing helps to improve responsiveness.**